

Vets for Freedom/VFF rally in D.C. July 17, 2007

On July 13, 2007, Vets for Freedom executive director Pete Hegseth issued an urgent call to action, which was reposted on a number of right-wing-leaning blogs^{[1][2][3][4][5][6][7]}, as well as by the conservative online publication The Weekly Standard^[8], in which he asked "every Iraq and Afghanistan veteran who believes in supporting the mission -- and defeating America's enemies -- to converge on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, on Tuesday, July 17. It's time the fighters in this war tell their representatives--face to face--that now is no time to betray the mission."^[9]

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Response to MoveOn.org?

This call to action may well have been in response to the plan by "liberal, antiwar group MoveOn.org" to hold "more than 100 demonstrations around the country" on the evening of July 17, 2007, "to put pressure on Senate Republicans to agree to a simple-majority vote on the withdrawal amendment^[10] by Sens. Carl Levin, D-Mich., and Jack Reed, D-R.I."^[11]

In a July 16, 2007, call to action update, Hegseth wrote that VFF "is coordinating with both Families United^[12] and Appeal for Courage to ensure maximum effectiveness."^[13]

A July 16, 2007, *Wall Street Journal* blog headline read "War Supporters Call in Reinforcements",^[14] Yochi J. Dreazen reported in the *Washington Wire*:

"Officials at Vets for Freedom, a pro-war advocacy group, say they will send approximately 25 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans to the Hill to press wavering Republicans to continue supporting President Bush's controversial surge of tens of thousands of additional U.S. troops into Iraq.

"The organization had originally planned to lobby lawmakers in September, the month long seen as the likeliest potential turning point for Congressional support for the war, but moved the event up after seeing a growing number of Republican senators break with the White House in recent days and back legislative attempts to force the administration to change course in Iraq.

This article is part of the **SourceWatch coverage of Vets for Freedom (VFF) and Vets for Freedom Action Fund (VFF-AF).**

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This article is the Center for Democracy's spotlight on groups and spin.

"We didn't think there would be Republican defections so early,' says Pete Hegseth, the Army reservist who runs the organization. 'But it became obvious that September was now July.'

"Hegseth said the group planned to focus its efforts on 'wobbly Republicans' like Sens. Susan Collins of Maine, John Sununu of New Hampshire and Norm Coleman of Minnesota. All three lawmakers have largely abandoned their earlier support for the war and are now calling for a new U.S. strategy for Iraq and the beginnings of a military withdrawal from the country."

Dreazen also wrote that "In addition to the Republicans, the group plans to meet with Sen. Joseph Lieberman, a Connecticut independent who caucuses with the Democrats but is unpopular with many members of the party because of his staunch support for the war."^[15] It should be noted that Vets for Freedom, acting under the auspices of its Republican-affiliated 527 committee Vets for Freedom Action Fund, promoted the re-election of Lieberman in the 2006 congressional election.

"Republican supporters of the troop surge brought in veterans who side with them," *News Now 2* of Charleston, S.C., reported on the July 18, 2007 morning news.^[16] It is not known how many attended the rally with Hegseth. However, Jerome L. Sherman of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported that Hegseth "stood with a dozen other veterans" and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky).^[17]

VFF's "mission", Aoife McCarthy reported in *The Politico*^[18], was "to reassure the GOP lawmakers supporting President Bush's war strategy as they endure a pummeling at home in TV ads and automated telephone calls from anti-war groups. And maybe, the veterans hoped, they could change the minds of other lawmakers.

"Their Capitol Hill offensive wound up illustrating the unevenness of the debate over the war and whether to end it. Veterans for Freedom has scant money to spend and no contracts with professional public relations firms," McCarthy wrote.

"The only senators who would meet with the pro-surge veterans were those who already shared their view. The real targets -- war opponents or wobbly supporters -- sent a first wave of senior aides to shield themselves from the pitch," McCarthy wrote.

VFF attendees

Among the "contingent of about 40 veterans from around the country who went to the nation's capital July 17 to talk about their concerns" with members of Congress, the sole representative from Ohio was Jim Szabo of Macedonia. Szabo, "who referred to himself as an 'auxiliary member' of Vets for Freedom because he is not a combat veteran himself", told local news reporter Jeff Saunders he was "a co-captain for the organization in the state."^[19]

Szabo is "a 1980 Nordon High School graduate who retired from the U.S. Navy after 20 years in 2004. When he moved back to Macedonia in April 2005, he said saw less support among Northeast Ohioans for the nation's efforts than there was in Virginia, his previous home," Saunders wrote.^[19]

July 17, 2007 press conference

Hegseth wrote in his July 16, 2007, update that VFF "will also have a group meeting with Senate leaders to discuss Iraq war policy. In addition, be on the lookout for our afternoon press conference, which will take place just off the Senate floor."^[20]

On July 16, 2007, VFF issued a press release stating that it would hold its press conference at 3:00pm on July 17, 2007, in the Mansfield Room (S-207) at The Capitol with "Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), Republican Conference Chairman Jon Kyl (R-AZ), Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee Chairman Joe Lieberman (I-CT), Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC), other senators."^[21]

This was confirmed in part by a local South Carolina TV news report that stated Senator Lindsey Graham "will join Vets for Freedom and a bipartisan group of senators who support the new strategy in Iraq."^[22] It should be noted that the only non-Republican named is Sen. Lieberman.

Present at the press conference were "the leaders of the no-surrender caucus"—Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, John McCain, Lindsey Graham, Jon Kyl, Mel Martinez, Kay Bailey Hutchison, and Joseph Lieberman. Lieberman "stepped up to

the podium and praised Vets for Freedom for coming to his aid after the Kossack hordes helped to defeat him in Connecticut's Democratic primary," according to a July 17, 2007 blog posting in *The Weekly Standard*.^[23]

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